

# Smith and the York River System TRAVELS ALONG THE YORK, PAMUNKEY, AND MATTAPONI RIVERS

The York River system isn't as well known to the boating public as the two big rivers that flank it, the James to the south and the Rappahannock to the north. In fact, the York, with its short, thoroughly English name, is an almost-straight river that runs approximately 35 miles from West Point, Virginia, to its meeting with the main stem of the Chesapeake Bay. It is brackish at West Point and grows progressively saltier as it flows to the Bay.

That's only half the story, though. What forms the York River at West Point is the confluence of two very different rivers: the sinuous, meandering, mostly fresh Pamunkey and Mattaponi, which drain bottomland hardwood swamps and huge marshes springing from the western edge of Virginia's coastal plain. Each contains an Indian reservation for its namesake tribe, whose thoroughly modern people proudly also remain deeply rooted in the ways of their ancestral river.

Both tributaries are longer than the York, with the Pamunkey draining the larger watershed. The Indians of 1607–09 referred to the entire river system as the Pamunkey, which Smith shows on his map as "Pamaunk Flu." The three-dimensional shapes of these river systems amplify their tides, which extend nearly 80 miles upstream from the Chesapeake. Walkerton on the Mattaponi, approximately 70 miles above the Bay, has the highest average vertical tide change in the entire Chesapeake—4 feet every day and 5 feet on the new and full moons.

## CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH ON THE YORK, PAMUNKEY, AND MATTAPONI RIVERS

Captain John Smith saw this beautiful system of rivers for the first time in the winter of 1607–08, while a captive of Opechancanough, chief of the Youghtanund as well as war chief and relative of the paramount chief Powhatan, who ruled all of Tsenacomoco (Tidewater Virginia). During his captivity, Smith traveled most of the upper watersheds of these rivers, absorbing as much of the landscape and the Powhatan language as he could. Smith met Powhatan at his headquarters of Werowocomoco, on today's Purtan Bay, approximately 12 miles downriver from the confluence of the Pamunkey and the Mattaponi.

A month after his release in early January of 1608, Smith led a diplomatic mission back to Werowocomoco by water for Captain Christopher Newport to meet Powhatan. They also briefly explored the lower Pamunkey. Smith returned twice that fall, again on diplomatic missions, and once in December to trade for corn. By then, relations between the colonists and the Powhatan people were strained.

In January and early February of 1609, Smith returned on a long trading trip up both the Pamunkey and the Mattaponi. This trip took place in a hard winter with the York iced up. Smith still traveled in the open *Discovery Barge*, sleeping under a tarp and walking ashore through muddy, icy water when he arrived at Werowocomoco on a low winter tide.

# FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION Chesapeake Bay Gateways

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail is part of a much larger story of the Chesapeake Bay—a story with rich historical, natural, and environmental chapters for your discovery and enjoyment. Throughout the Bay watershed a variety of parks, wildlife refuges, maritime museums, historic sites, and trails tell their part of the Chesapeake story. These special places are part of the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network. Visit them to experience the authentic Chesapeake.

Many of these Gateways to the Chesapeake are located along the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. Those with boating access to the water trail are noted throughout this Boater's Guide. Others await your exploration by land. You can make virtual visits via the Gateway Network's website at www.baygateways.net where you can find sites by name, location, activities, or themes. As you travel the York River system, learn more about important Chesapeake connections at the following Gateway sites and attractions.

# CHESAPEAKE GATEWAYS ALONG THE YORK, PAMUNKEY, AND MATTAPONI RIVERS

Watermen's Museum • Yorktown, VA

Yorktown Visitor Center and Battlefield •

Gloucester Point Park • Gloucester Point, VA

York River State Park/Croaker Landing • Williamsburg, VA

Pamunkey Indian Reservation • King William, VA

Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers Water Trail • Walkerton, VA

PREVIOUS PAGE

Autumn leaves on the Mattaponi River PHOTO BY BILL PORTLOCK

#### **EXPLORING THE WESTERN SHORE**

The estuarine environment of York River State Park offers great freshwater and saltwater fishing. Rent non-motorized boats, enjoy guided canoe/kayak trips in the park, or launch motorized boats for use on the river.

PHOTO BY STARKE JETT

This trip was successful in bringing back badly needed corn, but much of it was taken by force from Powhatan and Opechancanough. Deeply offended,

Powhatan moved his headquarters far up into the swamp at the head of the Chickahominy River and then into the headwater swamps of the Pamunkey to avoid any further contact with the English.

# EXPLORING THE YORK, PAMUNKEY, AND MATTAPONI RIVERS TODAY

The York is a pastoral river on both sides for much of its length. Most of the south bank is taken up by military installations, but just above them is the beautiful York River State Park, which offers a commanding view of the river and an interesting tidal creek (Taskinas) for paddlers.

The site of Powhatan's headquarters of Werowocomoco, on the north bank opposite the park, is

now privately-owned and off-limits, but there is a major archeology project taking place there. This project has much to teach us about the native people of this area. Just upriver is a small tidal river, the Poropotank, which was the center of the Indian community by the same name.

The Pamunkey and the Mattaponi rivers have some farmland, a few houses, and several riverside towns, but both look much as they did when Captain John Smith visited them. Both have strong spawning populations of American shad and rockfish (striped bass), along with some of the largest stands of wild rice on the Eastern Seaboard. Bird life includes nesting warblers and ospreys in the spring and summer, large flocks of waterfowl in the fall and winter, and bald eagles and great blue herons year-round.

The Pamunkey and Mattaponi Indian reservations offer a look at how both tribes have adapted to English and American cultures over the past 400 years while retaining strong ties to the rivers. Both tribes are justly proud of their heritage. These two rivers are indeed fertile ground for exploring the history of Captain John Smith, the cultures of the Pamunkey and the Mattaponi tribes, and the natural history of the Chesapeake's rivers.

#### RESOURCES&CONTACTS

John Smith's Adventures on the Pamaunk Flu is an interpretive water trail and auto tour guide produced by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. The water trail portion encompasses three rivers, from Yorktown on the York River, to Zoar State Forest on the Mattaponi, and Williams Landing on the Pamunkey.

Available online from the Virginia Tourism Corporation:

www.virginia.org/johnsmithtrail

Print copies may be purchased at a nominal fee by selecting "Contact Us" and searching the online store for "John Smith Trail Maps."



### **Good Vessels for Exploring the York River System**

#### PADDLE CRAFT (CANOES AND KAYAKS)

The Pamunkey and the Mattaponi rivers are well suited for exploring in self-propelled vessels. Both rivers are deep and powerful, with strong currents, so it pays to study tide and current tables when planning a trip. The Mattaponi is particularly suited to travel by kayak and canoe because it has landings open to the public at regular intervals, though there are few camping places currently available.

If you're a novice or an intermediate paddler, keep to the shorter trip itineraries. There's plenty to explore, especially if you are interested in the American Indian perspective.

#### **SKIFFS AND RUNABOUTS**

Skiffs and runabouts are great for day trips on the Pamunkey and the Mattaponi rivers. They'll also serve well in side creeks, provided they have push-poles aboard and are equipped to deal with mud flats and submerged logs.

If traveling these rivers under power, carefully tend your wake and stay in the channel if operating at speed. Broad marshes absorb wave energy reasonably well, but banks on the outsides of sharp turns do not. Speeds in the midteens are ideal, allowing you to see large sections of the rivers in a day and giving you a sense of how their parts fit together.

Keep a sharp eye out for bald eagles, ospreys, and great blue herons. Slow down or stop occasionally to investigate special places. Remember, there aren't many people to call if you get stuck, break down, or run out of fuel. It pays to be prepared and to keep your itineraries within your skills. Even short trips can reveal beautiful, fascinating places along these rivers.

#### **CRUISING POWERBOATS AND TRAWLERS**

Cruising powerboats, such as trawlers and cruisers with Chesapeake or Downeast workboat hulls, can cruise the whole system, but there are as yet no facilities for tying up overnight, and anchoring in the Pamunkey or the Mattaponi is tricky because of the strong currents. There is a marina development underway in West Point. When it is complete, cruisers will be able to take day trips up the two big tributaries.

As is true on most of the Chesapeake's upper tidal rivers, there is plenty of depth, but skippers must pay close attention to the channels' twists and turns, especially since there are no channel markers in the Pamunkey or the Mattaponi. These rivers put a premium on a skipper's ability to integrate information from charts, GPS, and visual cues about where the channel is located as the rivers wind through their deep, looping meander bends.

There is a long history of river traffic here. Sailing ships carried lumber and grain from farm wharves on both rivers. Steamboats and lumber schooners ran the Mattaponi to Walkerton into the early 20th century, and until 1933 West Point was a strategic junction where a railroad line from Richmond met steamboats running to Baltimore and Norfolk.

#### CRUISING SAILBOATS

There are better rivers to explore under sail. The winds are fluky, and the currents can be treacherous. Narrow, winding rivers like the Pamunkey and the Mattaponi can make anyone in a modern cruising sailboat marvel at how the schooner and bugeye captains of old negotiated these waters.

navigable with a Boate threescore or fourscore miles, and with a Shippe fiftie: exceeding crooked, and manie low grounds and marishes, but inhabited with aboundance of warlike and tall people."

— Captain John Smith describing the Pamunkey River

A section of the Pamunkey River passes along the Pamunkey Indian Reservation where people work the river as native ancestors have done for thousands of years.



PHOTO BY DEANNA BEACHAM

### **Trip Itineraries**

#### TASKINAS CREEK, YORK RIVER STATE PARK

TWO-WAY, 2-4 MILES



Rent a kayak or canoe from the park (It's easier than carrying your own up and down the hill.), or take a guided tour with a ranger. Taskinas Creek is a lovely little waterway that shows a great transition from tidal fresh marshes at its headwaters to salt marshes at its mouth. You'll be starting near the latter, using the new pier built for launching paddle craft into Taskinas Creek.

Paddle up to the junction of its two feeder creeks and take the left fork. It will lead you up into a lush marsh full of plants like tuckahoe (arrow arum), wild rice, and Walters millet, which the Virginia Indians harvested for food in Captain John Smith's time. If you have a light fishing rod with you (license required), see if there's a school of white perch in the hole at the junction or some croakers at the mouth.

#### YORK RIVER EXPLORATION

TWO-WAY, 5-50 MILES





Launch your skiff or runabout at Gloucester Point, Tanyard Landing, Croaker Landing (York River State Park), or Glass Island Landing (West Point). Explore as much or as little of the open York River as you like. In the reach above the Coleman Bridge (Gloucester Point to Yorktown), watch your depth finder to "see" the sharp channel edges and lumps that probably grew huge oyster reefs in Powhatan's time.

In a skiff or kayak, launch at Tanyard Landing and explore the Poropotank River, which is a larger version of Taskinas Creek. Note that Morris Bay in its lower reaches is quite shallow. At low tide, you will have to pick your way through to get out to the York's main stem.

#### PAMUNKEY RIVER EXPLORATION

TWO-WAY, 2-20 MILES





Launch your skiff, runabout, canoe, or kayak at Lester Manor and explore the river in both directions. Note the large marshes just upstream, across from the

Pamunkey Indian Reservation. In the spring, you may see members of this tribe tending their drift nets for American shad. Stay out of their way, but feel free to ask them about their fishing techniques and their shad hatchery.

Be sure to travel around West Island, cutting through Cumberland Thorofare at the base of the island and exploring Holts and Big creeks. The marshes up these creeks grow some of the largest stands of wild rice in the Chesapeake, acres and acres, as far as the eye can see. Note the prodigious depths (40–60 feet) in the river's channel on the outsides of the curves.

If you are on the Pamunkey in the fall, the colors of the trees' leaves will be spectacular, but be aware that there

are many duck blinds in the marshes. If the waterfowl hunting season is open, give them a wide berth, especially early and late in the day. Check with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (www.dgif/hunting/ waterfowl) for dates.

This is an area you will want to visit by land, too. The museum at the Pamunkey Indian Reservation at King William features displays on the Pamunkey tribe's history, culture, and subsistence over 12,000 years.

#### MATTAPONI RIVER EXPLORATION

#### ONE-WAY OR TWO WAY, 4-40 MILES



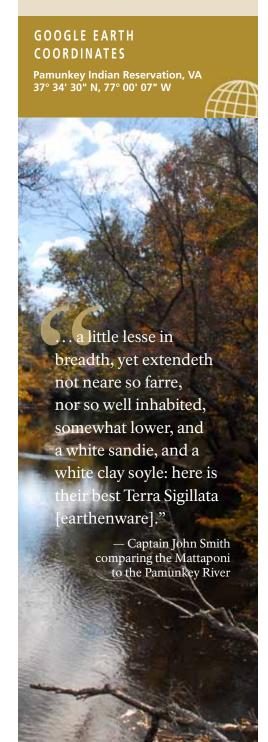
longest stretch is from Walkerton to Melrose Landing (about 15 miles). The transition from Zoar's deep forest through the tidal fresh marshes of Walkerton and Melrose to the brackish water off of Glass Island is striking. Try to plan your trip around the Mattaponi's powerful currents, whichever way they are flowing.

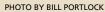
It's possible to set up shuttles to make these trips one-way, but you may find that two-way travel allows you to pick up details of the river on the return that you missed on the first leg. It's also worth visiting the river in all seasons, to see how the variations in temperatures affect the woods, marshes, and the river itself.

#### MATTAPONI TO PAMUNKEY EXPLORATION

#### ONE-WAY, 30-70 MILES

The narrow neck of land that is King William County allows an interesting opportunity for a one-way trip of up to 70 miles by skiffs. This itinerary is well suited to two or more skiffs traveling together. Get an early start to set up a vehicle shuttle between Aylett or Walkerton (10 miles below Aylett) and Lester Manor. Plan your trip direction and itinerary as much as possible to take advantage of the currents. Figure on traveling at around 13 knots (15 mph) for most of the run, which should give you plenty of time to slow down and poke around in interesting parts of the two rivers.





Pristine waters of the Mattaponi River

#### **TRAILHEADS**

#### ON THE YORK, PAMUNKEY, AND **MATTAPONI RIVERS**

#### **YORK RIVER**

**Gloucester Point Boat Ramp** 37° 14' 43" N, 76° 30' 14" W



www.dgif.virginia.gov (Use the "search this site" feature.)

**Tanyard Landing** Poropotank River (York River) 37° 27' 17" N, 76° 40' 05" W



www.dgif.virginia.gov (Use the "search this site" feature.) Note: this is a very shallow ramp and difficult for powerboats over 18 feet in length.

York River State Park (Visitor Center) 37° 24' 55" N, 76° 42' 48" W



757-566-3036, www.dcr.virginia.gov/state\_parks/yor.html

York River State Park (Croaker Landing) 37° 25' 38" N, 76° 43' 31" W





757-566-3036, www.dcr.virginia.gov/state\_parks/yor.shtml Annual parking pass required.

Glass Island Landing, West Point, VA 37° 32' 26" N, 76° 47' 23" W



www.dgif.virginia.gov (Use the "search this site" feature.)

#### **PAMUNKEY RIVER**

LESTER MANOR BOAT LANDING 37° 35' 10" N, 76° 59' 04" W





www.dgif.virginia.gov (Use the "search this site" feature.)

#### **MATTAPONI RIVER**

**Waterfence Landing** 37° 35' 31" N, 76° 47' 55" W



www.dgif.virginia.org (Use the "search this site" feature.)

**Melrose Landing** 37° 38' 14" N, 76° 51' 18" W



www.dgif.virginia.org (Use the "search this site" feature.)

**Walkerton Landing** 37° 43' 29" N, 77° 01' 23" W





Privately owned landing, but open to public use with donation to the local rescue squad at lockbox beside ramp.

**Aylett Boat Landing** 37° 47' 08" N, 77° 06' 11" W



www.dgif.virginia.gov (Use the "search this site" feature.)

Zoar State Forest Canoe/Kayak Landing 37° 48' 31" N, 77° 07' 14" W



804-769-2962, www.dof.virginia.gov/stforest/index-zsf.htm

**NOTE:** Trailheads indicate access points for the suggested itineraries. River maps indicate trailheads as either private or public. All launch sites are open to the public. Those listed as private are part of privately owned businesses. Public trailheads are located on local, state, or federally managed properties. Fees may be charged at any of the launch sites and are subject to change. Contact the site directly for the latest information.



